



NEWS RELEASE

WISCONSIN FOUNDATION AND ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

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The Future of Higher Education

Changing times at UW–Madison and across the country

MADISON, WI (February 11, 2021) — “The University of Wisconsin is the most important institution in the state,” argued Michael Grebe. “And the flagship institution is Madison. It’s vital to Wisconsin. There is no institution that has more impact on more people throughout the state, period.”

Grebe, who serves as vice president of the UW System board of regents, wasn’t merely boasting about the nature of an institution he serves and oversees. He was making a point about the vital role that Wisconsin’s public universities play in the state’s economic health. And he was expressing his concern that the UW System’s universities are weakening, perhaps to the point where they will lose their ability to drive growth for the state.

Grebe joined three other advocates for higher education during The UW Now Livestream on February 9: Katharine Lyall, former president of the UW System; Cory Nettles, Wisconsin’s former secretary of commerce and a board member for the Wisconsin Foundation and Alumni Association (WFAA); and Robert Venable, president of Charter Manufacturing and a member of Badgers United, which sponsored The Falling Behind Report. That report, which served as a focus for the conversation, made the case that restricted budgets and a lack of independence are holding the UW System back in the race to attract and keep the best faculty and students.

“There really is a crisis and a need for action and a need for change,” said Venable. He noted that state support has fallen from 42 percent of the UW’s budget a few decades ago to only 14 percent today. That decline has been exacerbated by the pandemic economy. “We would be having this conversation without COVID,” he said, “though it’s a catalyst.”

Lyall noted that the state legislature’s decision to freeze tuition over the last 10 years has made it impossible for UW System universities to set a market rate for the price of their services. “I don’t know of any of any other university that has had its tuition frozen for the past decade,” she said. “I don’t know of any business that could survive having its prices frozen for a decade.”

Nettles called on viewers to “light up the phone lines” and ask legislators to give the UW more freedom. He described the university as an economic “juggernaut” that supplies the state, nation, and world with highly educated entrepreneurs. “I didn’t fully appreciate the awesome power of the university until many years later, when I became secretary [of commerce] for the state of Wisconsin,” he said. “To see the number of graduates that the UW turns out and how those graduates go on to become leaders of industry throughout the world was certainly an eye-opener for me.”

The panelists each gave brief remarks before joining in a roundtable discussion. Host Mike Knetter, WFAA’s president and CEO, moderated the conversation and put forward questions from those who viewed the event live on YouTube.

The speakers addressed the various points of The Falling Behind Report, and each made the case that providing funding and administrative freedom for the UW System will be important to ensure Wisconsin's growth. "The UW is the engine that drives statewide economic development," said Lyall. "I think sometimes we forget that, thinking of the UW as a Madison issue, but it is part of a statewide system that reaches every corner of Wisconsin."

To hear more from the speakers, [view a recording of The UW Now](#). The series is offered live on Tuesday nights via YouTube, and the next event will take place February 16.



ABOUT THE WISCONSIN FOUNDATION AND ALUMNI ASSOCIATION

The Wisconsin Foundation and Alumni Association is a nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing the interests of the University of Wisconsin–Madison. It brings together alumni and friends of the university to raise, invest, and distribute funds, and it connects a growing number of Badgers to help facilitate their support for each other and the university. For more information, please visit supportuw.org or uwalumni.com.
